

Great Hopes for the Past

- *Baccalaureate Mass*
- *June 9, 2012*
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My dear graduates, this is the next to last time you get to hear me speak to you as your university president. Once more at commencement tomorrow and then my presidential talks are toast! So I am not going to waste this opportunity.

Recently I heard someone interviewed—I can't remember who it was, which is a blessing of having "senior moments" since you don't have to give credit to anyone, don't have to footnote it. The person was asked, "What are you most hopeful about?" He—at least I think it was a he—responded, "I have great hopes for the past!" What he meant was something like he had great hope that the past would inform the present and fashion the future, that the past would be used as a reservoir or well of wisdom, of insight, of truth, of tested experience as our best hope for a healthy future. I have the same hope, the same hope for you. I have great hope for your past, especially all of your education; hope that you will draw up from the well of all you have learned from our common history, and from your own history the resources which will refresh your future.

Look around this cathedral at the altar, stained glass windows, incense, candles, songs of the choir, pulpit, scriptures, even the vestments of the bishop and priests, the wild garb of your professors and even what you yourselves are wearing. It is all from the past, has long distant origins in history, brings a tradition of faith, community, and scholarship forward to today. The cathedral is a well of the past, and this ceremony is wrapped in the past as the best hope for the future.

Today is the feast of what we call Corpus Christi, which translated from Latin means "Body of Christ". It is the celebration of the Catholic belief that the bread and wine consecrated by the bishop or priest in the midst of the community of faith becomes the body and blood of Christ, Christ's real presence among us body and blood, soul and divinity. That is a very deep well from which you can refresh the future, it is one of the most important depths of our faith, coming all the way from that Last Supper in Jerusalem we read Jesus celebrated with his disciples, up through two thousand years to today. Indeed, we have great hopes for the past, hopes that its clarity and depth and wellspring of life will indeed give life to and refresh our future.

It seems to me that anything important from the past has small, strange and awkward beginnings. Moses writing down words heard on a mountain, Jesus celebrating his passing over from death to life in a rented room with his uncomprehending disciples or students, some inventor in his or her parents' garage, you all gangly and fearful coming to Seattle U.'s campus for the first time with your parents who were torn between tears and relief. This feast too had an awkward beginning.

A German priest in the Middle Ages heading for Rome stopped in the Umbrian town of Bolsena to celebrate Mass. When he had doubts about the real presence of Christ in the bread and

wine—and he was not a Jesuit for this was three centuries before the Jesuits popped up on the scene—blood issued from the bread and chalice and stained the cloth on which they were resting. The faith of the Christian people swept up this small, strange, awkward event and gave birth to our feast.

I remember as a young priest helping out in an Italian village on this very feast. I'd be wrapped up in heavy brocaded vestments and would carry the consecrated bread in an elaborate gold display case. We would head off from the church in procession, me under a canopy held aloft by four elders in dusty uniforms, preceded by 40 children in their white first communion dress, and they preceded by the rag-tag, off-key, but loud town band; and, most importantly, Don Simone, the pastor and king of the town, with his bullhorn, barking out orders and readily accepting donations from the people left, right, and center. I was instructed to march straight through incredibly beautiful displays made of spring flowers and paste in the middle of the streets of the village. We'd circumnavigate the whole town, bring everyone back to the piazza in front of the church and then—I'd love to kill him!—Don Simone would hand me the bullhorn and tell me to give the people a little sermon on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist... in Italian!... as he continued to work the crowd. Isn't it great to have a past, isn't it amazing what it can become? You can see why I have such great hope for the past.

What is most important can bubble up deep in the well of the past. It starts on little occasions and with little people but gives rise to the wellspring of hope we experience in the present and will depend on for the future. I am encouraging you to have great hopes for the past, letting it well up within you, as you face your future.

Never underestimate, or look down on, or disparage the past, nor think of it as simply outdated, or exhausted in potential. This came to me in a striking and humorous way in a couple of sentences Walter Isaacson wrote:

“Imagine if we'd been getting all of our information on electronic screens for four hundred years, and then some modern-day Gutenberg came along and took the words and pictures and put them on nicely designed pages that we could read in the bathtub or bus or backyard. We'd be impressed. We might even declare that paper was such a good technology it would replace the Internet some day.”

Wow, words on paper, what a neat invention, not confined to a screen but you can chuck what is written on this marvelous thing called paper under your bed, line the walls of your room with it, drop it in the mud, blot it with suntan oil at the beach, even create a whole building with it and call it a library where you can go and meet your friends.

Ah! We love the present and all that is new and we think ourselves the pioneers of a brave new world. Do we have great enough hopes for the past, enough fullness from the inexhaustible riches of the past, of our histories and traditions, to have a chance of being the people of depth and of faith we will need to be for the future?

Why do I say this in a church, on the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, and to you on this weekend of commencing from Seattle U. the rest of your life? I speak of the great hopes I have

for the past because that is where faith comes from, that is the only place it can come from, and I want you to really give faith, your faith, a chance. Just because faith has a history and comes from tradition, does not mean it is out-of-date or to be disparaged, or can be set aside in our brave new world, or has begun to wane in its fullness of meaning for our present lives and world, and peoples and challenges and opportunities. Faith is simply the well of your wellbeing in the future. Believe in the real presence of Christ in your life. Hope in the past; give your faith a future; give yourself a future.